

LITERATURA PUERTORRIQUEÑA

CARMEN VALLE'S *DIARIOS ROBADOS*: BATTLING WITH SOCIAL NORMS

Contemporary Puerto Rican writer Carmen Valle remains little known among the general public and the critics. Though her poetry has received some attention,¹ her prose has only been examined briefly in Ramón Luis Acevedo's anthology of prose fiction by Puerto Rican women,² or fragmentarily in an article by Alvin Joaquín Figueroa also looking at narrative works by Luisa Valenzuela and Manuel Ramos Otero.³

In this essay I will explore *Diarios robados* (Stolen Diaries),⁴ Valle's only prose published to date. It is a collection of journal entries, allegedly written by a dozen individuals between November of 1950 and June of 1982. Typically each entry centers on an issue of concern or interest to its writer at the time.

After examining the question of genre, I will turn my attention to the various entries. Capitalizing on the recent success of texts in the documentary mode, following their acceptance into the canon in 1970,⁵ Carmen Valle introduces what in fact is fiction as non-fiction. Attempts to validate one's fiction by passing it off as partly or totally historically based has a long tradition in Hispanic letters.⁶ In Valle's case, however, it is her focus on people who are all in some way victims of a repressive society, people who rarely speak for

¹ See Margarita Fernández-Olmos, "From the Metropolis: Puerto Rican Women Poets and the Immigration Experience," *Third Woman*, 1.2 (1982), 40-51; Yamila Azize, "Poetas puertorriqueñas en Nueva York," *Cupey*, 4.1 (Jan.-June 1987), 17-24; and "A Commentary on the Works of Three Puerto Rican Women Poets in New York," in *Breaking Boundaries: Latino Writing and Critical Readings*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1989; pp. 145-65.

² Ramón Luis Acevedo, *Del silencio al estallido: narrativa femenina puertorriqueña*, Río Piedras, Editorial Cultural, 1991; pp. 53-55.

³ Alvin Joaquín Figueroa, "Feminismo y homosexualidad: las voces de Luisa Valenzuela, Manuel Ramos Otero y Carmen Valle," in *New Voices in Latin American Literature*, Miguel Falquez-Certain (ed.), Jackson Heights, Ollantay Center for the Arts, 1993; pp. 175-85.

⁴ Carmen Valle, *Diarios robados*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones de la Flor, 1982.

⁵ That year the prestigious *Casas de las Américas* decided to grant *testimonios* a separate prize side by side with the novel, the short story, drama, poetry and the essay. See John Beverley, "Anatomía del testimonio," *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana*, 25 (1987), p. 9. For an introduction to the testimonial genre, consult also *Testimonio y Literatura*, a collection of 17 essays edited by René Jara and Hernán Vidal, Minneapolis, Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1986; and issue #70 of *Latin American Perspectives*, 18.3 (Summer 1991).

⁶ In Chapter 7 of a book co-authored with Marc Zimmerman and entitled *Literature and Politics in Central American Revolutions*, Austin, University of Texas Press, John Beverley discusses some of the points of contact between the testimonial narrative and the neopicaresque and autobiographical novels. He later mentions Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* and *Cuzcatlán* as examples of fictional novels presented as *pseudotestimonios*; p. 178.

themselves in fiction, that links her to the testimonial genre.

The title of the work fulfills two functions: it creates the illusion that the pages originated from a *number* of *real* people for whom Valle only serves as intermediary, and, in the context of growing competition for potential readers' time by the visual media, and the wide appeal of *telenovelas* in particular, it tantalizes a public apparently thirsty for secrets and drama.

While a diary is normally written free of concern about criticisms from others because it is meant to remain *private*, and is therefore a safe space to explore one's thoughts and feelings with only minimal self-censorship, the fact that the documents were reportedly *robados* ('stolen') suggests that its authors had no control over the publication (the making *public*) of the entries and no opportunity to revise the texts or remove passages that might jeopardize them in some way. Valle leads her readers to believe that they have in front of them authentic, unedited material, and that they occupy a "privileged" position because they may well catch a glance at an intimate, hidden side of the diarists.⁷

The impression given by the title that the diaries were written not by just one but rather by a *series* of *flesh-and-blood* individuals of various ages, social backgrounds, and both genders is successfully sustained through the language, the nature of the issues raised in the entries, and the uneven depth of their treatment. Valle breaks that illusion in the last diary when, with tongue in cheek, she attributes the entry to the *ghost* of a woman who committed suicide. The diary is ironically identified by the inauspicious #13. Readers who have been convinced of the existence of the diarists now find out that these are all creatures emanating from Valle's vivid imagination. By hiding until the last entry the extent to which her voice has been involved in the production of the stories, the author plays with the issues of authenticity and authorial intervention so hotly debated among critics of documentary texts. Testimonials typically include a prologue or notes in which the compiler or editor discusses the degree to which the text has been rewritten.⁸

Most protagonists in *Diarios robados* are torn between what they would like to do or keep doing, and what society expects of them. Which side prevails varies, and so does the characters' degree of awareness of the deep source of their problems. It appears that in Valle's eyes, the way the dilemma is ultimately resolved in each instance is secondary to the process of persuading readers to question norms and the limitations these place on some members of society. This facet of *Diarios robados* is yet another link to the testimonial genre.

⁷ Some diaries found on the market can even be secured by a small lock, a feature highlighting their private character.

⁸ In "Latin American Documentary Narrative," *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 41-55, David William Foster studies that aspect in the testimonial texts produced by Rodolfo Walsh, Hernán Valdés, Miguel Barnet and Elena Poniatowska; pp. 42-53.

Indeed, such narrative strives to make readers aware of the oppressive social forces, and hopes to gain their solidarity in the fight against oppression.⁹ The tone, however, is quite different: the first-person narrator of a *testimonio* often actively pursues public exposure, at times willingly sacrificing his or her privacy for it; the alleged authors of the "stolen diaries," on the other hand, never intended for their journals to become public, but because readers are cleverly hooked to the texts, they are forced to consider social expectations.

With the exception of entry #8 (featuring Francisco, a teenager with cancer), in all stories, the protagonists are female. Entry #11, though written by a man, centers around a crisis facing a young woman. That twelve out of thirteen times the characters struggling with an issue are of the feminine gender can be interpreted in more than one way. Aside from the fact that the author is a woman herself and is therefore likely to identify with other women and feel at home articulating their concerns, it may indicate that in the Puerto Rican community to which all protagonists seem linked, across the spectrum of classes, social norms are particularly harsh on women, a hypothesis confirmed by a number of studies which have exposed the double standard operating in most Latin American societies, and until recently, still codified into laws in some of these countries.¹⁰ The unusually high number of female protagonists could also be explained by the chosen medium of expression. The diary has been and continues to be used mostly by members of the feminine gender, often for lack or difficulty of access to other channels of expression.¹¹ In *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, after proposing a broad definition of "autobiographical literature" which includes diaries among other forms of writing, Sidonie Smith observes that the female narrator of such texts is a "resident on the margins of discourse, always removed from the center of power within the culture she inhabits."¹²

This explanation, far from invalidating the first interpretation, reveals that Puerto Rican girls and women might be encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings—including their opposition to social norms—in a manner that does not threaten the very fabric of society, because, as I have already pointed out, private journals are not supposed to enter the public forum, where an open discussion of those norms could take place. Diaries provide women and girls an outlet for their frustrations, but no true voice and no real power to effect

⁹ See John, Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *op. cit.*; p. 177.

¹⁰ In *Diarios robados*, typically the setting remains rather vague, with an occasional clue pointing to Puerto Rican culture. Mirroring the geographical division of that community, some stories take place in New York, and others on the island.

¹¹ In fact, nowadays blank diaries are still specifically marketed to attract girls; the hope being that they will keep a journal throughout the rest of their lives.

¹² Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography. Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987; p. 51.

change.¹³ thoughts and feelings remained largely unrecorded in history books, and in fiction.

As stated earlier, several of the protagonists of *Diarios robados* are new voices in the fictional world, and often, the topics they touch upon have traditionally been considered taboo: so the readers are forced into the shoes of a recently-widowed battered wife, a female university professor in love with one of her undergraduates, a homeless woman, a single mother from the informal sector of the economy in prison for murder,¹⁴ and a terminally ill teenage boy, to mention a few.

It should be stressed that *Diarios robados* is not an oversimplification of class, race and power relations, nor an exercise in male bashing. Valle lets the characters speak for themselves; she avoids passing judgement. By putting side by side entries she attributes to female protagonists belonging to different generations and social backgrounds, she shows that not all women necessarily think alike, nor do all women speak with one voice. Besides personality, the period, class, race and culture they were born in, and their marital status at the time of recording the entry shape their views and responses.

As will be detailed later, some of these female characters are actually voluntary accomplices or even contribute to smothering other women by insisting that they all abide strictly by the norms established by such a system (diaries #2 and 11 are good examples); while others indirectly cooperate with the patriarchal system, choosing, for instance, financial security over freedom of movement or speech (diaries #1 and 3). In fact, only a few sustain over a long period of time their challenge to the roles and rules of behavior imposed on them by society, and generally they do so at a great personal cost (in particular, diaries #4 and 6). Overall though, obstacles to self-fulfilment created by social norms constitute a main concern in the entries.

The stories present the protagonists in a moment of crisis or at a turning point in their lives. The dynamic aspect of the situation makes it all the more gripping. In each case, the definition of the individual in its social dimensions—that is in its relation to others—is called to question. As indicated above, what the character aspires to do or does conflicts with written or unwritten rules of conduct sanctioned by a society organized hierarchically around and across

¹³ In the Spanish-American world, until the second half of the nineteenth century, women's thoughts and feelings remained largely unrecorded in history books, and in fiction. They were interpreted almost exclusively by male narrators, most often in a rather stereotypical manner. Then, for decades after that, whole segments of the female population (women from the lower classes and from cultures other than the "pure" Iberian stock) continued to be invisible or voiceless, and the issues relevant to them, ignored in written texts. The new status acquired by testimonial narrative in 1970 helped remove some of that social blindness.

¹⁴ Commenting on Diary #4, the entry allegedly written by her, Acevedo notes how little Puerto Rican prose writers have explored the mentality and world of women living in poverty at the margins of society; *op. cit.*; p. 54.

race, class and gender. What these protagonists talk about specifically, what troubles them, and the identity of their significant other(s) all reveal a lot about them and their assumptions about the world and their place in it. Also revealing are the ways they express their dilemma.

Entry #1 introduces readers to a mature woman who has very recently been widowed. The funeral just over, Flora takes a moment to reflect on her married life to Pedro, an abusive husband. Her ambivalent feelings towards him are revealed almost immediately. The second sentence reads: "*Tengo pena, aunque, a la verdad no tanta*" ('I am sad, though, to tell the truth, not that sad').¹⁵ Such ambivalence permeates the whole entry: "*Yo lo quería ... Y lo odiaba también,*" she states later ('I loved him, and I hated him').¹⁶ As Acevedo accurately notes, "She resents his authoritarianism and at the same time, remembers him with admiration for upholding the image of manliness she has internalized."¹⁷

She recalls the first time Pedro hit her, shortly after their wedding, because she had objected to his night-long outings at cock fights, and how, when she regained consciousness, she found him crying by her side. The readers then learn that two to three weeks later when she expressed anger as Pedro had once again come home at dawn, he put a gun to her brow. Flora also narrates that one day, after she climbed into the family car to go shopping, thereby defying his arbitrary proscription, he used the weapon to ruin the tires. This third incident sets a pattern of escalating violence.

The reasons she readily acknowledges for having stayed in such an abusive relationship are "*costumbre y miedo*" ('habit and fear'),¹⁸ especially after she became pregnant, as Pedro repeatedly threatened to harm her and the baby. In a later paragraph, two other motives surface: age (she was, after all, not getting younger), and financial consideration (if she left him, she would not be able to maintain the same standard of living).

Criticizing Flora for her pragmatism would be unfair: she had a degree in pharmacy, but Pedro refused to let her work outside the home. Besides restricting her movements, and maintaining her financially dependent on him, he controlled her emotionally: the only friends she was allowed to have were also friends of his; so that, in effect, she found herself increasingly isolated. As time went by, leaving him became more difficult. Other women apparently knew how Pedro was, and sympathized with Flora, but felt powerless to help her, which suggests that in Puerto Rican society in 1973 (date of the entry), among women of that generation, wives abused by their spouses had little choice but

¹⁵ All translations are mine.

¹⁶ Valle, *op. cit.*; p. 7 and 8 respectively.

¹⁷ "Resiente su autoritarismo, pero al mismo tiempo lo recuerda con admiración por cumplir con la imagen del hombre machista que ella ha internalizado." *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ Valle, *op. cit.*; p. 7.

to put up with it.

With a few strokes of the pen, Carmen Valle delineates very convincing characters. Flora is a true-to-life battered wife; she is a complex individual, exhibiting strengths and weaknesses. The scope of her first project as a widow and the way she formulates it contribute to making her psychologically credible: while in the first paragraph she states assertively that she will get rid of her husband's fighting cocks, giving them away if necessary, she concludes the entry reiterating her intention, but in a much weaker tone, now wondering if she should not consult her college-aged son before disposing of the birds. In an entry that portrays the protagonist's progressive silencing by and subordination to her husband, it seems more plausible that she would feel uneasy about making decisions completely on her own, without taking into account her son, the other significant man in her life.

Women's emotional and/or financial dependence on men is an issue that reappears in several later diaries, often combined with other problems. Diary #7 (the only one with more than one entry "recovered" by Valle) was supposedly written by a white Puerto Rican teenager who has fallen in love with David, a young Black Haitian. From some of her comments, it appears that nothing less than money or a prestigious profession can make white Puerto Ricans she knows overcome their racial prejudices, and the darker the color of the skin, the greater the bias. She quotes her friend, Miriam advising her secrecy: "*Nena, no se lo dejes ni imaginar a tus papás [...] O sabe Dios de la barbaridad de que es capaz tu padre...*" ('Girl, don't let your parents even think about it [her feelings for David]. Or God knows what your father is capable of doing...').¹⁹

The diarist eventually decides against pursuing the relationship for a number of reasons, paramount among them her father's disapproval. Although she does state that she wishes people did not see racial differences, the next entry reveals that she did not even mention David's existence to her parents, and much less confront their prejudices. Instead, when the young man telephoned her at home for her birthday, the thought that they might find out who was calling just terrified her. Although she knew that David was sensitive to racial discrimination, she could not conquer her own fear of rejection. While the narrator's failure to deal with racism is the central issue of this diary, a major underlying reason for falling short is the teenager's emotional and financial dependence on her father.

Diary #8, the only one focusing on events in the life of a Puerto Rican boy, provides an interesting contrast; it was supposedly written by that boy, at age 16. Francisco, who was previously treated for cancer, believes he is having a relapse, and decides to channel all his energy into committing to paper childhood memories which have begun to resurface.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*; p. 43.

Although much of the entry deals with the celebration of Epiphany several years earlier and has little relevance to our current discussion, the last paragraph touches briefly on more recent events. Francisco describes himself as an avid reader of adventure novels; he mentions going to the movies "solo" ("by himself")²⁰ and heading downtown on Saturdays, these being normal activities for him before the cancer struck. His independence prior to his sixteenth birthday calls attention to the very different situation of the seventeen-year-old girl from the previous diary who was still under her father's yoke. It is clear that, in Valle's estimation, in the early seventies, Puerto Rican girls did not enjoy the same freedom boys did.

In most diaries, relationships with members of the opposite sex are problematic for women because of societal expectations placed on them. Luz María, the alleged author of entry #4, ends up in prison after killing the father of her children, for cheating on her. She is a single mother who, from a very young age until her early twenties, worked as a domestic servant for Don Antonio and his family. By then she had three children out of wedlock, and she was known to like to go to a bar downtown. Don Antonio had his wife (Doña Francisquita) tell her that she needed to put her life in order if she wanted to continue working for them.

The diary shows that Luz María was not inclined to let anyone, not even her bosses, tell her how to live her life: she resigned her position, and from then on barely survived on odd jobs on the streets. The double standard prevailing in Puerto Rican society is once again brought to fore. While women are stigmatized for having illegitimate pregnancies, men are not held responsible for their actions. It never occurred to Don Antonio that Luz María was only partly to blame for her situation and that, because Lalo Cuevas, the father of the children, could not be counted on for supporting his offsprings, she was already paying dearly for her "mistakes."

The resistance to social norms displayed by the first narrator of Diary #6 has also had serious consequences. That person is now homeless. The readers learn about her daily struggle for survival in New York City, how she has come up with ways to feed herself and keep warm, and how bathing is often a luxury for her. Her erratic thought pattern and her odd reaction at finding a glove on the sidewalk, in particular her uncontrollable weeping, suggest that she may be suffering from depression or some other mental illness. The inner fighting about whether to keep the glove or not takes on huge proportions. Soon she is re-evaluating her whole situation. Her fear of failure and of rejection leads her to talk herself out of the few options she has to put her life back together.

She has never married because, as she puts it, she does not want someone else to rule her life. Her perception of the institution of marriage as an unequal

²⁰ *Op. cit.*; p. 53.

relationship could not be more explicit. She turned down a girlfriend's offer to share an apartment, too afraid the latter would soon have her confined to a mental hospital; a house seemed to involve more responsibilities than she could handle; and she ran away from one of the local shelters because she could not get used to the strict schedules and the daily funerals, and now doubts that they will take her in again. These and other comments she makes point to the fact that she is maladjusted; the rigidity of social norms has reduced her to a wreck.

Even women belonging to comparatively privileged segments of society, women with a solid formal education and without immediate financial concerns, perceive social norms as obstacles to self-fulfillment. Entries #9 and 12 illustrate this point. Diary #9 is by an upper-middle-class married woman emotionally involved with another man. As she explains in the entry, she would rather keep the relationship as it is: that is to meet with her lover occasionally and in circumstances over which she has full control. Although she expects to remarry after she gets a divorce, she does not seem thrilled about that prospect. A relationship is exciting to her as long as there remains some mystery surrounding the other person; too much togetherness, she believes, kills the passion and pulls the couple apart. If she had it her way, she might even further limit contact with her lover so as to intensify the desire.

Entry #12 is allegedly by a thirty-seven-year-old female university professor who appears to be raising a child alone. She recounts how she fell in love with Ricardo, a student of hers close to graduating. Spontaneity prevailed; the text suggests that things acquired their own inertia. There was none of the planning and control that characterized diarist #9, the other woman involved in an extra-marital relationship. As the end of the semester approaches, she finally faces the facts: Ricardo will go on with his life, as the men she knows—especially younger men—do; so the way to handle the situation is to let him go gracefully, and try not to harbor resentment.

The narrator explains that she quickly forgot all the "good" reasons not to get emotionally attached to an undergraduate student, including her own professional reputation and their age difference. While women involved with younger men are usually ridiculed, paternalistic societies do not blink at relationships between men and women decades younger.

With the second diary, the readers enter the mind of an obsessive-compulsive early middle-aged woman. She is on a train bound for downtown New York. The way she socially ranks the women around her, based solely on their looks, and the fact that every detail of her own appearance has been calculated point to an individual who has adopted as hers a system that relegates members of her sex to a decorative role, reducing them to objects. She must feel insecure, because she projects her behavior on other women, imagining them categorizing her in a similar manner, thereby bringing out another issue: that of competitiveness among females for male attention. This character's self-worth depends largely on being noticed favorably by men.

It is clear, however, that she knows first hand how deceptive appearances can be. Uncovering intimate details about other people's lives fascinates her. She even confesses deriving morbid pleasure from it. The readers witness the woman acting on that obsession when she finds an abandoned purse. She examines its content, and based on that information, attempts to construct a psychological profile of its owner. Who gave that woman the money she found in a secret compartment, she wonders, and where does she get so disheveled that she needs so many hairpins? What about the perfume with its romantic French name?, and, Are the numerous tokens not a sign that she is often away from home? From such tenuous evidence, diarist #2 is about to conclude that the owner of the handbag is having an affair! Yet the woman whose purse she is searching might simply enjoys wearing perfume; she may have joined a health club, which would explain the hairpins; and the money could indicate someone who likes to be prepared for the unexpected. In fact, many women living in the suburbs and holding a job in New York City would carry such items in their handbags. Readers are left to ponder why diarist #2 immediately assumed that the purse owner was dissatisfied with her marriage.

Diary #10 reexamines the issue of snooping tackled in the second diary. The tone, however, is different. Its author is a young girl; and the date of the entry is November 10, 1950, shortly after the death of Titi Lala, an aunt who lived with the family. It appears that, as she grew up, the narrator was explicitly forbidden access to Lala's bedroom. She did however sneak in, and in a chest of drawers, under some clothes, found two boxes containing old jewelry and accessories. More than once she went back, drawn by the unusual content of the boxes, in particular a golden pocket watch, an opal ring and a silver-plated ballroom purse; and on one occasion, she almost got caught.

How had such items ended in her aunt's possession? One thing is sure, Titi Lala could not have purchased them on her third-grade teacher's salary, she observes. What unrecorded story could they tell her (and the readers) about her relative? In a gesture somewhat reminiscent of that of literary critics dedicated to recovering women's writing and interpreting it, the girl has unearthed "artifacts," and tries to make sense of them.

Unlike diarist #2 who, acting out of compulsion, would even go through the private belongings of total strangers, this narrator is hoping to shed some light on the history of a woman from her family. Could the pocket watch and the pajamas under which the boxes were hidden hint at the presence of a man earlier in Lala's life? The readers learn that the girl's aunt spent a few months in New York City and returned looking depressed. She seemingly lost her mind, and died of a heart attack shortly after. Could Lala's odd conduct after the trip (such as her running around naked in her bedroom and her obsessive preoccupation with sex) have resulted from frustrated hopes? Her rapid mental decline after what possibly was a final rejection suggests, I believe, her emotional dependence on a man. In this case, unlike narrator #2, besides the contents of the

boxes, readers have a clear behavioral change and information about Lala's financial situation to substantiate such a view.

Of all the alleged female diary-writers, the only one who recognizes having actively pursued a greater dependence on men, seeing in it more benefits than drawbacks, is the young woman of entry #3 who recently married her boss Sergio Ramírez Olivade. She is convinced that she has reached the happiest period of her existence; everything—or almost everything—in her life has worked out according to plans. But what she takes to be *her* plans are actually very similar to those a patriarchal society reserves for its women. She was a virgin when she got engaged, a fact she is very proud of, and she hopes to get pregnant soon. She expresses her desire to have a son first—a “*machito*” as she puts it—and then a daughter, and she indicates her intention of bringing them up with clearly differentiated gender roles, so she talks, for example, about “taming” the girl (21). She also takes pride in being considered the perfect daughter for looking after her parents.

Hardly two weeks into the wedding, Sergio is already occasionally spending the night away from home, but she forgives him: he is so affectionate afterwards. From conversations they have had, it appears that he wants his future children to be raised by their mother, so she will have to give up her position as executive secretary, something she has no objection to, because Sergio says he is willing to rearrange a room in their house into an office for her to continue her profession at home. How in effect this will work is unclear: the diary is dated June 1980, not the late 1990's. In the meantime, as Sergio found it difficult to have his wife work with him, she has taken a job in another company.

She now hands her paychecks to him, and he gives her a weekly allowance; she thinks he is “*divino*” (‘divine’)²¹ because he is taking care of everything, and she appears unaware of the fact that she has partly surrendered her financial independence. The only problem she does see, and she qualifies it as a “*problemita*” (‘small problem’),²² is that Sergio does not want her to continue having lunch or going to the movies with her single girlfriends. What he seems to be most concerned about is the image she would project by being associated with unmarried (in his mind, husband-hunting) women, probably because it may reflect badly on him. She finally convinces herself that his looking after her reputation is simply another sign of his love for her.

Her largely predictable way of thinking is also conveyed by how she “writes.” Her identity is clearly centered around her new marital status: “*Ahora soy la señora de Ramírez Olavide*” (‘I now am Mrs Ramírez Olavide’), “*Soy*

²¹ *Op. cit.*; p. 19.

²² *Op. cit.*; p. 20.

una señora y una dama" ('I am a wife and a lady'),²³ she notes as if in disbelief that she has achieved her ambitions: to get married, and marry into a higher class. She also proudly repeats that Sergio told her that having been an exemplary daughter, it was not surprising she was such a good wife. When female colleagues to whom she confides her "*problemita*" try to open her eyes to what is going on, she remarks: "*Pero yo sé más que ellas: la que ha tenido suerte soy yo*" ('But I know better: the lucky one here is really me').²⁴ She is in denial, and working hard to hang on to her illusions.

I will now examine several of the entries discussed thus far, alongside a few others, to establish the extent to which Valle's narrative techniques enhance the content and contribute to holding the readers' interest. The versatility the author demonstrates is, I would argue, an essential factor. What caused the protagonist to react, the perspective on the issue, and the style vary with each diary: they are carefully adjusted to the maturity and level of formal education of the alleged narrator, thereby maintaining the illusion of authenticity. Even assuming that one of the characters has failed to capture the readers' imagination, the situation depicted in the entry and/or the issue raised will most likely draw their attention.

To foster the verisimilitude of the diary situation, most of Valle's protagonists write in first person and therefore generally remain nameless. It is through the grammatical forms of pronouns and adjectives, and the details of the situation itself, that the readers reconstruct the gender of the narrator, a process requiring an active involvement on their part.²⁵

As suggested above, Valle is sensitive to the fact that a person's frame of reference typically expands with their age and amount of schooling. A large portion of entry #4, the diary supposedly written by a woman in prison for murder, centers on the relationship that woman maintained with her former employer, Doña Francisquita, after leaving her service. Separated from her parents at a young age, Luz María saw in her a motherly figure: she relied on Doña Francisquita when things got really rough; more than once, her children did not go hungry thanks to the generosity of the older lady.

The journal entry includes several quotes by Doña Francisquita encouraging Luz María, advising her, and scolding her, indicating the major role that woman played in her life. Significantly, the young single mother, who never attended school, learned the fundamentals of writing under her guidance. Comments following the first two quotes do, however, reveal that Luz María thought Doña Francisquita did not fully understand her "world." These comments have

²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Op. cit.*; pp. 20-21.

²⁵ In a few instances, however, as you may recall, the name of the diarist is revealed (entries #1, p. 9; #4 p. 25; and #6, p. 51). This is achieved through quotes or indirect references.

an oral quality to them, with numerous ellipsis, antepositions, emphases, such as the sentence: "*La pobre Doña Francisquita, yo distraerme con eso [escribir un diario], cuando lo que me distraía a mí era irme a la calle abajo.*" ('Poor Doña Francisquita, ... me? entertained with that [writing a diary], when what I really enjoyed was going downtown').²⁶ Such a wording seems natural from a woman from the lower class, without formal education.

The entry also uncovers aspects of Luz María's private life. She comes out as a person who has no long-term perspective, lives each moment as it comes, and acts on impulses. The young woman does not seem able to connect causes and consequences, and such inability eventually results in her incarceration when she kills Lalo for cheating on her; nor does she appear to comprehend the fact that her former bosses, a generation older, might not always be around to help her out. Valle effectively discloses this by juxtaposing some blunt remarks by female guards with Luz María's protests.

Acculturation is the central issue of entry #5. This diary is the shortest one in Carmen Valle's collection: it covers 18 lines only, an appropriate length given that its author appears to be the youngest of all the alleged writers in *Diarios robados*, and Spanish is not a language in which the child seems to be used to write. Content and style combine to create that impression. The text almost exclusively focuses on one Saturday in the life of the diarist. The present is emphasized; just like Luz María, although for different reasons, the protagonist has no long-term perspective. A babysitter is alluded to, and watching cartoons on TV and riding a bicycle around the neighborhood are two of the activities listed. The passage begins with "*Mi madre dice...*" ('My mother says...'),²⁷ which is repeated with the slight variation "*dijo*" ('said') on three occasions. The mother is clearly a main authority figure, even if the child does not always agree with her. As a minor, the narrator only has a limited say.

Because the protagonist's mother is considering moving the family back to Puerto Rico, she has apparently insisted on having her child practice writing in Spanish. Though the narrator must have learned to write in English, Spanish is probably spoken at home, which would explain "*Orita*" (sic) for "*Ahorita*" ('Right now'), and the misspelled words ("*alludar*" [*ayudar*, 'to help'] and "*voi*" [*voy*, 'I am going']) (33). The date for the entry was originally written in English, then crossed out and rewritten in Spanish. Likewise, the names of language and days of the week were initially capitalized, presumably under the influence of English; "boring" was substituted by "*aburrido*" as an afterthought, and "babysitter" and "Cable TV" were left untranslated. The lack of consistency in spelling ("*quería*" (sic) then "*quería*"), the frequent absence of transitions, and a limited variety of sentence structures may be attributed to the

²⁶ *Op. cit.*; p. 25.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*; p. 33.

writer's young age. Finally a rather awkward definition of a "diary" also points to a young person who has not fully mastered language yet.

In half a page, Valle conveys the feeling of uneasiness of a Puerto Rican child brought up on the American mainland with limited exposure to the Hispanic culture, but told to write in Spanish, a child with divided loyalties.

The author's portrayal of the white teenage girl of diary #7 is equally convincing. After observing that she might be falling in love with David, a young Haitian, the diarist includes a quote by a girlfriend named Miriam. In a melodramatic tone, the latter, who is also a friend of David, recommends secrecy. The quote highlights the tension between adolescents and their parents; its inclusion in the diary illustrates the importance the narrator attributes to the opinion of her peers, something not unusual in teenagers.

The reasons the diary-writer is attracted to the young man (his deep voice, what she can learn from his travels and his knowledge of other cultures), and the motives she gives for not going out with him after all (her father's disapproval, what her girlfriends and the nuns at school might say, how others would look at them in clubs) indicate that she is self-conscious, superficial, even selfish, other traits typical of people of her age in many parts of the Western world. The third entry confirms that she is self-centered: she apparently asked Miriam if David had said anything about her before leaving for New York on a professional assignment. The tone is melancholic.

Much of what the narrator writes about, rather than being based on personal experience, consists of reactions she anticipates if she were to go out with David. The fact that, in the diary, mentions of activities in which she took part are rather scarce, and things seem to happen mostly at the level of feelings or in the imagination of the girl fits well the alleged narrator, a female teenager brought up in a rigid environment in a Hispanic country. Her lack of experience is further reflected in her tentative way of introducing statements about David: "*Creo que me estoy enamorando de un muchacho negro*" ('I think I am falling in love with a Black guy'), "*Creo que es guapo*" ('I think he is good-looking').²⁸

Carmen Valle's rendering of Francisco is less realistic. While, on the one hand, the way he addresses his parents ("*Mami*" and "*Papi*") appears rather childish for a teenager, on the other, his eagerness to put in writing early memories strikes as a bit unnatural for someone so young. The story within the story is less problematic: it is the narrative of a visit to Don Eugenio's home on the eve of Epiphany when Francisco was approximately nine years old. Don Eugenio, one of his father's friends, had apparently fallen sick. The perspective and limited depth of vision could pass as those of a young child.

Francisco recalls how Doña Mariana, Don Eugenio's wife, patted him on

²⁸ *Op. cit.*; p. 43 and p. 44 respectively (emphases added).

the head when they arrived that evening. He remembers how dark the house was, and how he kept entertained by looking at saints' engravings placed on top of a chest of drawers, while his Dad conversed with his friend. He also remembers how tired the latter appeared, and how little he spoke. The smell of cane syrup from a nearby factory, mixed with those of camphor and gas from the bedroom lamp come back to him, and so does the taste of the sweets Doña Mariana served. The five senses are conjured up to reconstruct the memory: to those of touch, sight, smell, and taste, Francisco added the sound of Christmas carols broadcast on the radio around that time (sense of hearing). It creates a nostalgic but also paternalistic image of a Puerto Rico of the past, when women cared for the sick and did the cooking, and sugar was the pillar of the economy, a recurrent image in texts by Puerto Rican male writers of the 1930's and again in René Marqués's post-war production.

The entry which started with "*Yo sé que me voy a morir pronto*" ('I know I'm going to die soon')²⁹ closes on a slightly less pessimistic note: dying is no longer seen as a certainty, but only a possibility, and now ... so is surviving. The very last sentence reads in part: "*Yo lo único que sé es que ... a lo mejor no iba a estar este año y aunque estuviera no iba a ser como aquél.*" ('The only thing I know is that ... maybe I would not be around this year [for Epiphany], and even if I were to make it, it would not be the same.')³⁰ Between the two sentence fragments once again there appear numerous references to the way things were in the past. Mortality is not the only issue Francisco is struggling with, he also has difficulties dealing with changes.

Carmen Valle is as gifted at entering the conscience of an obsessive compulsive woman as she is at conveying the anxiety of a homeless person or communicating the fantasies of an upper-middle-class woman. In diary #2 she offers a fascinating insight into the workings of a mind driven by compulsion. The protagonist narrates how she fought the urge to pick up a purse she found on the train, to no avail. Though the fear that it might contain a bomb crossed her mind, her drive was stronger. She then mentions the guilt she felt, and the excuses she made up just in case she were caught. She elaborates on how she set about examining the contents of the handbag in the public bathrooms of the train station, in spite of the dangers of such a place, and the foul odors; and she even explains what she did there to avoid suspicion. By detailing the protagonist's every thought and emotion, Valle shows the excitement the woman feels about the incident and the obsessive nature of the behavior.

When another person enters the bathrooms, the narrator is brought back to the dull reality of the day: she needs to hurry to be on time to pick up the children at school. The deviant character is an average Mom, from the lower-middle

²⁹ *Op. cit.*; p. 49.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*; p. 53.

class! The readers might recognize themselves in diarist #2; before condemning her for "snooping around," they may have to examine their own motivation for deliberately looking at stolen diaries (*diarios robados*).

The entry focusing on the homeless woman (diary #6) is divided into two unequal segments. In the first segment, it soon becomes obvious that the protagonist is a social misfit. She has not seen Renée, the only friend she mentions by name, for years. The people on the streets making derogatory remarks about her have been reduced to "*bocas*" ('mouths').³¹ At times, she seems extremely sensitive to her surroundings, and at others, completely oblivious of them, and deeply absorbed in her thoughts. She is overcome by waves of emotion which range from anger, to anxiety, to shame about her appearance. A monologue revealing how she has gradually isolated herself is, for example, abruptly interrupted by "*el guante, sí, toda esa gente, la policía*" ('the glove, yes, all those people, the police').³² Her agitated state of mind is also conveyed by the inclusion of several questions and exclamations, and numerous negative words. The rhythm is jerky, as sentences vaguely related by topics are typically juxtaposed or linked by a generic "y" ('and'); free associations prevail.

The second segment of the entry is much shorter; it confirms some inferences readers might have made about the homeless woman. There is a sudden change of narrators signaled only by the closing of quotation marks and the beginning of a new paragraph (which in previous diaries never had that function). For a brief moment, until they realize that this change has taken place, readers experience at the textual level what the second narrator is trying to communicate: total incomprehension. This narrator is another woman who "dared" to sit on a bench in Central Park next to the destitute woman. The glove connects both passages. Without warning, the homeless throws it at the other woman, then picks it up again, and hurries away. Lacking the insight readers have, the second narrator's response to such odd behavior is sheer terror.

By placing us in the privileged position of literally reading a homeless woman's mind and by conveying, in a highly sensitive manner, the very basic human feelings and needs of that person, Carmen Valle converts the fear we might harbor with respect to these individuals into compassion. Her understanding of human psychology is likewise revealed in diary #9.

The married woman having an affair inhabits a world of fantasy. She would rather imagine a more intimate relationship with that other man than actually live it. Her somewhat twisted way of thinking is reflected in the writing style Valle attributed to her. In keeping with her fondness for mystery, the protagonist refers to her lover as "X" in the diary. As a woman who likes drama, she pictures herself talking to him, to try to convince him that what she advocates

³¹ *Op. cit.*; p. 38.

³² *Loc. cit.*

is for their own good, that is to keep their love alive. She then pauses, and, as in an aside, asks herself (in writing) why she is putting all that down in her diary, adding theatrically that she will have to tear that page away (a decision she, evidently, does not carry out).

She next refers to her lover in third person, stating that she will not tell him anything after all, and noting that had *he* suggested what she has just proposed, she probably would not have accepted. She concludes the entry with two questions, which lead the readers to gather that she is back where she started, unsure of what to do, and unhappy with the limited options society offers to women wanting a relationship with a man, but rejecting the institution of marriage.

Finally, in diary #12, to convey that the relationship between the female professor and the undergraduate student developed naturally—a point central to the story—, Valle once again skillfully molds her narrative style. The entry begins with "*Después acepté un trago en su apartamentito; una noche; un fin de semana...*" ('*Later I accepted to have a drink in his apartment; one night; a week-end...*').³³ From the very first word, one has the feeling of catching a story already unfolding. Besides drawing the readers' attention with its suggestive content, the sentence fragment gives a sense that one thing led to another. A couple of paragraphs down, two short exchanges with parallel structures and partially similar phrasing confirm that idea: "*Un café y acepté. Dos entradas a Un perro andaluz. 'Sí, tengo babysitter' y acepté*" ('A coffee? I accepted. Two tickets to see *Un perro andaluz*. 'Yes, I've a babysitter' and I accepted').³⁴ Then, in the last paragraph, the sentence fragment that opened the entry reappears *verbatim*, now embedded in a context, as if to suggest that the relationship evolved fast and the professor found herself in her student's apartment before she fully realized the consequences. The repetition could also be hinting at the fact that this was the turning point.

As mentioned earlier, most diary-writers in Carmen Valle's collection are female characters, and a central issue for many of them is their relationship with a member of the other sex. Several of the women are married or were married at some point. The protagonist in diary #3 aggressively pursued marriage; she appears to define herself almost exclusively as Sergio Ramírez Olavide's wife. Marriage, however, has not brought long-lasting happiness to any of the other women: the widow of the first entry was physically and mentally abused by her husband; the woman in entry #9 is seeing another man as her relationship with her spouse has become too plain; the mother in entry #2 who has an urge to find out about other women's romantic lives does not seem fulfilled either. Significantly, only the couples mentioned in the diary attributed to the

³³ *Op. cit.*; p. 71 (emphasis added).

³⁴ *Op. cit.*; p. 72.

seriously-ill teenage boy appear to interact harmoniously; that view, though, could be tainted by the nostalgia that permeates the entry.

As the protagonist in entry #1 illustrates, leaving a marriage against the husband's wish is not always possible, particularly for those Puerto Rican women living on the island (*versus* in the US), and there is hardly any support for a wife who attempts to do so. Just as Carmen Valle debunks the myth that jealousy is a sign of love in entries #1 and 4, it becomes clear that marriage has little to do with love.

For reasons not discussed in the text, the university professor (diary #12) no longer has a husband in her life; although her relationship with Ricardo is one of the very few happy in the book, it cannot last, partly because of their age difference, and partly because society does not condone such relationship. Unlike the men in entries #1 and 3, who took calculated steps to restrict their wives' freedom while they spent the night out, she accepts the fact that her partner has to live his life first, and that to expect otherwise can only lead to resentment.

The female characters who never got married do not fare better. Luz María, the young woman from the informal sector who had four children out of wedlock, ends up in prison for killing Lalo, their father. He regularly beat her, and, as indicated previously, she could not count on him financially to help her raise their offsprings. The old maid Titi Lala (diary #10) remained poor all her life, in spite of working for years as a third-grade teacher. By the time of her death, she was seriously depressed and had lost her mind. As for the woman in diary #6 who would not marry because she did not want anyone to rule her life, she also suffers from depression and barely survives on the streets of New York City.

Valle's female protagonists have few options to fight the limitations imposed on them by a patriarchal society. Emptiness and monotony characterize their lives.³⁵ What most share is an active imagination. Some try to escape to a world of fantasy; what they cannot achieve in real life, they will do in dreams. The widow in entry #1 cannot free herself and admits to imagining her husband dying in a car accident; the woman in entry #2 lives vicariously: from the contents of a purse, she imagines how its owner might spend her time; and the woman in entry #9 fantasizes spending a vacation with her lover and making love to him.

In a few instances, what the female characters imagine prevents them from trying new paths or taking a chance: the homeless woman contemplates going back to the shelter, and then envisions sharing an apartment with Renée; she rejects both options as still too stifling; the teenage girl of entry #7 imagines how her parents and girlfriends might react if she dated David, which stops her

³⁵ Acevedo, *op. cit.*; p. 54.

from challenging racial prejudices. Finally, in the case of the university professor, picturing Ricardo leaving her actually prepares her to accept what she sees as unavoidable.

In this study I have endeavored to show that by adjusting her narrative techniques to the content of each entry, and treating the dilemma facing her protagonists with great sensitivity, Carmen Valle manages to keep alive the interest of the readers she drew in with her catchy title, and makes them witness the oppressing effect of social norms, thereby placing them in a position where they cannot ignore the issue.³⁶

The story is set up in such a fashion that readers are soon intrigued about the ladies, then eager to come up with an explanation as to why one of them might be worried, and the other scandalized. Although the male narrator's own partial conclusions help along the way, it is still up to them to tie all the loose ends and come up with a final interpretation. Once again, after hooking the

³⁶ Except for its setting in New York City, diary #11 has no links to the Puerto Rican community. Moreover, it is structured differently from all the other diaries. Rather than focusing on something that happened to him, the narrator dedicates most of his entry to an incident in which he only took a marginal role: that of an eye-witness. The protagonists of the incident are all women.

He reports seeing three ladies loaded with packages arrive at the café where he was sitting, in Little Italy. He recalls overhearing them order coffees, admire each other's purchases, and then talk in harsh terms about a fourth woman. One of the ladies (an Italian going by the name of Nina) said she was worried about something, while another (called Emma) remarked that she was scandalized. Details of that exchange, however, were lost in the background noises of the café.

At that point of the conversation, a younger woman approached the trio and threw something at Nina that, on hitting the ground, made a metallic sound (the narrator later inferred that it was probably a ring), telling her sarcastically that she could have her son back, and that she might as well forget about her working at his shop, giving her grandchildren, and confessing to Father Pellegrini (in all likelihood a Catholic priest).

The narrator explains that he then paid for his consumption and left. He writes: "No quería oír gritos" (I did not want to listen to screams) (68). He adds that, later in that afternoon, as he was shopping for a pipe in a Hindu bazaar, he saw again the younger woman on a bike carrying a backpack, a chair, and two canvasses with dripping paint.

The story may be interpreted at two levels: one could see in it the break-up of a relationship due to cultural incompatibility: the young artist appears to have concluded that the expectations from a traditional Italian family—in particular from a domineering future mother-in-law—restricted her personal expression and growth in ways that were unacceptable. She may have acquired a taste for some degree of independence through the practice of her art; and because she does not have children in her charge, it is probably somewhat easier to pull away. One could focus on the male narrator and what the story reveals about him based on what he told readers about himself and how he reported the incident. In this case, a few details stand out: the manner in which the man chose to depict women (shopping, gossiping, criticizing each other) is less than flattering; the reason he gave for leaving the café further suggests a condescending (misogynistic?) attitude; finally the fact that he felt the urge to specify that he then went to shop for a pipe (a smoking device associated with manliness) "in a Hindu bazaar," a detail to make himself more interesting, points to a conceited man. In fact, the narrator starts to resemble more and more Sherlock Holmes, a fictional detective typically pleased with himself when, from bits of conversation and gestures, he successfully determines what happened, using his power of reasoning.

readers, Carmen Valle has managed to keep them interested. Taking some distance from the women's story, these might even see in the narrator a caricature of themselves, so confident that they can reconstruct a picture of the other diary-writers from bits of information included in a journal entry. Such move away from the core story is healthy, as readers are reminded that their perceptions and interpretations are influenced by their own backgrounds and biases, just like the male narrator's perceptions.

Diary #13, the last of the collection, is a wink at these readers. The writer of this entry claims to be the spirit of a woman who committed suicide. In spite of the tragedy, the tone is light: the reason for the suicide remains unexplained—as if irrelevant—and the character describes herself as someone who has always liked to laugh at herself and play tricks on people. She maintains that she wrote the entry two days after her death, and asks the readers to suspend their disbelief and take her word for it. Her preposterous request has just the opposite effect: it sends a warning that, in spite of its title, *Diarios robados* is fictional. We can now better appreciate Carmen Valle's skill in making these numerous characters so true to life. Just like the ghost of diary #13 knows what her siblings think and feel because she acquired extra-sensorial powers, the Puerto Rican author has entered the minds of a number of individuals and shared her "discoveries" with us.

This last entry also raises the issue of truthfulness: to what extent are diaries reliable documents? The youngest diary-writer (entry #5) resorted to self-censorship when she crossed out a sentence that reveals that her baby-sitter would let her watch adult movies on cable TV. We might also recall that the fictional writer of entry #9 (the woman having an affair) thought about tearing the page of the diary in which she expressed what she really wanted. As people attempt to give a coherent meaning to their lives, don't they necessarily leave out some facts or events? Isn't the way they prioritize them and tie them together largely subjective? Where does reality end and fiction begin? *Diarios robados* comes to a close in a merging of the two, when Catalina, one of the characters Valle created, removes the diary from the bedroom of her ghost sister. The latter will not be able to add new entries because, as she explains, a person who has committed suicide is forever confined to the room in which she died. She anticipates that her diary will end up by accident on a used books display in front of the local university, where it is likely to fall in foreign hands. Could it be ours?

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